

TRINITY RIVER BABOONS

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I should probably explain why I tend to focus on reprinting original sighting reports (where possible) instead of summarizing these old articles and just telling the stories for cryptozoology enthusiasts to enjoy. One problem with that latter approach is that context and details are often removed, as the storyteller weaves these old tales into the broader picture of an alleged mystery animal, glossing over or ignoring those aspects which may contradict the argument being made for a cryptid's actual existence. As cryptozoology researchers, we have a responsibility to be careful not to manipulate evidence to fit our expectations. (That is one reason, for example, I have a problem with even the indexing in certain books. By intentionally calling a particular mystery animal a "black panther," even in the index, when the original sighting details are far too ambiguous, an author is subtly reinforcing a particular belief.) Obviously, archival technology today is light years ahead of the research capabilities of thirty years ago, so I can't fault the simple lack of data in early cryptozoology books—but is it necessary today to force a preferred explanation to fit flimsy arguments with scarce details? No, it's not. A mystery is no less interesting for not having a label. This is not a plea for keeping mysteries mysterious, however. Sometimes the evidence can be rather compelling for a given explanation, and there is a certain satisfaction when the pieces start to fall into place.

Baboon-like animals from the northern Trinity River bottoms (Dallas County) in Texas have been mentioned in the cryptozoological literature, but primarily as a 1970s phenomenon. So I

was a little surprised to find a story from 1929. A baboon-like animal, nicknamed "Little Rollo," was reported from the Trinity River area over several months. Unfortunately, as with many early mystery animal flaps, not all sightings were detailed in the newspapers, and are only referred to after the fact. (Of course, historical local newspapers not yet digitized or available online may still offer yet unnoticed accounts.) "Little Rollo" was the name of a nineteenth-century (1800s) children's book character, and appears to have been occasionally applied to mischievous simians, just as we see "Jacko" or "Jocko" given as a common pet monkey or ape name. The newspaper articles from 1929 show a distinctive humorous bent.

BONEHEADS MAY LEAD HUNT THROUGH
TRINITY BOTTOMS TO SOLVE "ROLLO" MYSTERY

Dallas, Texas, *Morning News*, July 16, 1929

An extraordinarily careful check of the membership of the Bonehead Club of Dallas has been completed by Bonehead Secretary John H. Cullom.

The check was made for the purpose, so a member has said, of finding out missing members. Since the baboon, Little Rollo, has terrorized the Trinity River bottoms for six months, certain members of the Bonehead Club have been insistent that one of the club's members has been missing just that long.

That check-up was inspired by a suggestion coming from a prominent citizen of Dallas that the Bonehead Club enlist the assistance of American Legion members and members of Dallas Chapter, American Institute of Banking, in a baboon hunt staged on a colossal scale.

Those in the banking institute chapter would furnish expert help and advice for the chase since they have had several years' experience in conducting annual wolf hunts in Dallas County.

This brought matters in the Bonehead Club to a head, for the club did not want, so it is thought, to start the hunt and then trap one of its own members. It is alleged that as soon as the effects of the trip to Mineral Wells, booked for next Friday by the Boneheads, wears off, the matter of going hunting for Little Rollo will be taken up.

Also it is alleged, said, thought and surmised that one of the near-prominent members of the club will be asked to stay in his room at home on the day of the hunt, thereby avoiding embarrassment for himself and the club in the event of his capture by fellow-club members.

A thoroughgoing hunt by hundreds of Boneheads, legionnaires and members of the Institute of Banking Chapter, started just after the banks closed and continuing through the night, Mr. Cullom said, surely would end for always speculation as to whether or not there actually was a baboon loose in the Trinity bottoms.

BIG BABOON NOT OF THE GARDEN VARIETY BREAKS UP BOYS' MARBLE GAME

Galveston, Texas, *Daily News*, July 20, 1929

By Associated Press.

Dallas, Tex., July 10.—Little Rollo, a big baboon, of unknown residence, made another of his periodic appearances here today.

This time it was a wild-eyed group of boys which reported that Rollo pounced into the middle of their marble ring and broke up the game.

For months, according to the reports, unvarying as to description, the baboon has skulked about the Trinity River bottoms. After each public call he presumably retires to his dark recess.

Officials of local zoos long ago have checked their membership and reported nothing missing and it is assumed Little Rollo is not of the garden variety.

CRASHING CRATE, SHAG, BABOON PLAYMATE FOR
LITTLE ROLLO, HIES INTO TRINITY BOTTOMS

Dallas, Texas, *Morning News*, July 25, 1929

Near the west end of the heavily traveled Oak Cliff-Dallas viaduct, a bushy headed playmate for Little Rollo, ninety-pound baboon who has played hide and go seek in Oak Cliff for eight months, broke the bonds of captivity and made for freedom in the Trinity River bottoms.

Exhibiting elusiveness Little Rollo never will have, Shag escaped from a crate in which he was being carried in an automobile and scampered away from his new owner, Carl Steinmann, manager of Kidd Springs.

Mr. Steinmann had bought the monkey from a South Texas man and had just taken him off a train at the Union Terminal.

While Little Rollo thwarts the efforts of zoo keepers and police to capture him in the creek bottoms near Marsalis Park, Shag roams among tall weeds along the Trinity.

Shag is smaller than all descriptions would have Little Rollo. It will be only fifty pounds of horror to greet the motorist whose automobile Shag may board for company.

Little Rollo's last unceremonious appearance was a week ago in the 1100 block of East Eleventh street, Oak Cliff, when a group of boys left their marbles for the ninety-pound monkey to play with. Rollo, however, specializes in breaking up negro fishing parties in the creek bottoms. What Shag's specialty will be remains to be seen.

Capture of Shag has been made tempting by a \$50 reward offered in a newspaper advertisement by his owner.

An enlarged treasury will be among the things discussed by the Dallas Bonehead Club at its meeting Friday, when the proposed baboon hunt comes up. Roy E. Hale, commander of Radio Post, American Legion, is scheduled for one of a Rolloesque appearances without warning.

A couple of points can be brought up here. First, there's a distinct possibility that when witnesses during this period were black, this created a cultural barrier for the sightings to pass with any serious consideration to white officials. Rather (and we can see this in other communities around the country at this time when other mystery animals are reported), when a black witness reported seeing something, it was treated as a joke. As with:

Abilene, Texas, *Morning News*, January 3, 1930
Consternation reigned supreme when a bunch of negro 'possum hunters were treed the other night on the Trinity river by a pet baboon that had escaped.

This is a shame, because there's a good chance that the black community was in a position to offer information on encounters with the "baboon" while fishing or hunting. That information is now lost.

Second, most people don't realize that during the 1920s and 1930s, primates were very popular exotic pets, and quite a few were imported from all over the world: monkeys, chimps, baboons, and lemurs were all fair game. One Brownsville, Texas, rancher with a penchant for exotics ("Snake" King), even owned a real gorilla, which unfortunately died in a fire. (Note, of course, that stories

often misidentified one species of primate for another, so care needs to be taken not to assume that a pet “baboon” was truly a “baboon.” Many times a “gorilla” was just a chimpanzee.) It should surprise no one that sometimes these primates escaped (or even released as pet owners realized their pets required more care than they were willing to give). We know that many exotic ungulates have taken successfully to Texas soil in free-range enclosures, and there is no doubt that many primates could survive and reproduce, establishing their own colonies.

Actually, we know for certain that they can. In 1972, a troop of Japanese macaques, or snow monkeys, was imported by a Texas man after they began causing problems in their native Kyoto. Many did not last long in the much warmer climate, but the survivors and their offspring quickly adapted to the Texas environment. The Texan planned to “free range” the macaques, and catch occasional ones to sell, but he ended up dying in 1973, putting an end to those plans. They roamed free for years, before being rounded up in the 1990s. Today, descendants of that original troop can be seen at the Born Free USA Primate Sanctuary near San Antonio. In a 2000 newspaper article, journalist Marty Racine spoke with Dilley (Frio County) residents who said that locals were very reticent to speak about snow monkey sightings in the early years, as they were afraid they’d be ridiculed. (Apparently the man who released the macaques hadn’t widely advertised his plans to the community, so it surprised more than a few people who ran across them.) Racine noted that some say they still see feral snow monkeys roaming the back country.

These Japanese snow monkeys are almost certainly responsible for one published story. Anon. (1972) noted that Morris Cox, an exotic animal owner, had set a trap for a monkey or ape that was seen by several individuals in the Hardy Road–Campbellion Road area of south Bexar County. One group of youngsters saw a monkey in a tree, and threw stones at it. “The monkey jumped down and chased them off,” said the Sheriff’s office. Cox found tracks in the area and noted “a footprint from a member of the ape family.”

In the same spirit, I suspect the following story, from very South Texas, could be based on an exotic escapee, given its proximity to

Brownsville, Texas, exotics dealers. The primate details are, unfortunately, barely given.

SAFARI FOR HARLINGEN LION
NETS ONLY MONKEY BUSINESS

Harlingen, Texas, *Valley Morning Star*, July 30, 1951
Harlingen—A safari into darkest South Harlingen in search of a lion netted no lion. But the hunter found monkey tracks.

There was also evidence of ocelots, said B. O. Thomas, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service trapper, who spent Sunday trying to track the “big cat” Mrs. H. H. Sublett saw last Thursday near her home here.

Trapper Thomas said Mrs. Sublett’s description of the animal would apply to either a small Mexican lion or a large jaguarundi—or possibly an ocelot, although ocelots are distinctly spotted.

But after a four-hour trek along the Arroyo Colorado south of here, Trapper Thomas bagged no ocelots, no jaguarundi and no lions. Just monkey tracks.

The seasoned trapper’s failure gave a moral victory to Wiley (Trader Horn) Ake, Harlingen’s city poundmaster. Last week Mr. Ake said he intended to track the lion. But when he found that curious bystanders had obliterated the tracks he went back to hunting lost dogs.

Now, we jump to the early 1970s, back to Dallas County, as I have not yet run across any Trinity River baboon stories in the intervening years. Due to copyright restrictions, I can’t reprint these stories in full, but I’ll try to detail the gist.

Anon. (1973a) noted that Lion Country Safari was sending out a team to try and catch the baboons said to be terrorizing a Seagoville trailer park. Locals believed the animals had escaped

from a defunct wildlife park, World of Animals, located about 15 miles down river. The current owner of the park property, Tiger Lake, also had wild animals, but said all of their baboons were accounted for. The Seagoville trailer park manager said the baboons played in her backyard, but side-stepped banana-baited traps. One mobile home resident, Lee Brock, watched an animal emerge from the river bottom brush, climb a fence, and then perch on top of his chicken house. He called police, and an officer arrived and shot the animal. It weighed 25 pounds and stood 35 inches high.

Anon. (1973b) noted that the “baboon” shot by the policeman was actually a vervet monkey, and “probably somebody’s pet.” The Lion Country team thought it was unlikely that a single monkey accounted for all the sightings. Lee Brock noted that he had seen his first primate almost a year ago, nestled in a pecan tree. He said, “I called the police and they asked me what I was drinking.” The trailer park manager, Mrs. W. R. Sims, also said that nobody took her monkey stories seriously until now.

Anon. (1973c) offers a further detail, noting that the “band of baboons” had staked a camp along the river, and at night conducted raiding parties on the trailer park to scrounge for food.

Anon. (1973d) offered a final note, that policemen were looking for ways to catch the baboons without hurting them, after animal lovers bombarded the local SPCA chapter with protest calls over the killing of the vervet monkey. Teams of animal experts, however, failed to find any trace of the baboons.

The newspapers’ interest seems to have died down after this, and I have found no further information on Trinity River baboons. These stories then entered the cryptozoological literature as examples of elusive out-of-place animals, or possible sightings of a North American ape (NAPE).

Now, in evaluating a case like this, there are multiple possible explanations, with varying degrees of likelihood.

Is there evidence here of an unknown, undescribed primate species? The mere presence of out-of-place primates is not evidence of an unknown species. There is nothing in that to distinguish them from accidentals of a known species. We require something more.

At the very least, a consistent pattern of sightings over long periods of time should be accompanied by physical or behavioral descriptions that don't match known species. I might be more open to just a long period of sightings if there were traditional Native American accounts in the Trinity River area. But, we don't have any of that here. I don't think it is responsible to simply "connect the dots" between a few disparate ape-like accounts from widely separated regions and offer this as evidence for a North American ape.

Is there evidence here of a long-term introduced population of a known primate species? Again, I think this is unlikely. If nothing else, both cases (1929 and 1973) show that the primates in question were fairly commonly encountered, with indications of utilizing human resources for food (scrounging). Why wouldn't there be additional mentions, even offhand, in the local newspapers (especially when it is so near Dallas)? I have checked four different archival databases, but can't fill the blank period between these two dates for the Trinity River region. This is not to say that further evidence won't be gathered, but from what we currently have, there's no case for a resident breeding population of baboons or other simians.

Are they simply two unrelated cases of primate accidentals? I doubt very much that misidentifications of known species are responsible for these two accounts. And, we know that primates were especially popular in early traveling menageries and as exotic pets back in the 1920s and 1930s. I suspect that "Little Rollo" was simply an escapee or release, which may have eventually wandered away into the river bottoms, never to be heard from again. I wish there were better details on the 1973 sightings—did anyone ever actually see more than one primate at one time? Or did a "monkey scare" conjure up a troop of simians from a lone vervet monkey? This might be worth investigating, though it is almost 40 years in the past, and the principals may be long gone.

I do think it is interesting that the Trinity River baboon story emerged at the same time that snow monkeys began to take root on Texas soil further south. I have to wonder if there wasn't an ill-advised attempt to introduce a primate in the river bottoms that

was less successful than with the Japanese macaques. Of course, I would be very interested in hearing about any further stories that cryptozoology enthusiasts might run across.

If there is one thing we can learn from this, though, it is that witnesses should be encouraged to tell their stories. There are too many cases of people being afraid to mention what they've seen, or of officials laughing at them when they do. That's not to say we should listen uncritically, or believe them unconditionally—but we can empathize with those who have seen something out of the ordinary with the point of investigating and educating, rather than ridiculing.

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